

RECOLLECTIONS OF AUDUBON PARK.

BY GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL.

Plates XVII-XVIII.

THE interest which we all feel in John James Audubon, and in those connected with him, must plead my excuse for writing this and for the too frequent use of the first person singular.

I spent my boyhood in Audubon Park, and what I have to say relates to members of the Audubon family and chiefly to the woman to whom—quite as much as to her husband—we owe the greatest work on ornithology that America has produced. I should like to give you some impression of the personality of Madam Audubon and her son, John Woodhouse, and to make you see the surroundings of their later lives somewhat as I recall them.

Lucy Bakewell Audubon was a fit mate for her great husband, for her steadfastness and determination supplied qualities which in some degree he lacked. I believe that of the two she was the stronger—as she was the better balanced—character. If she did not have her husband's vivacity, charm, versatility and artistic talent, she possessed characteristics more important: the force to keep him up to his work, the faith to cheer his heart when discouraged, the industry and patience to earn money that he might continue his struggle, and the unyielding will to hold the family together. It was largely through her assistance and support that at last he won success.

A few years after the death of Audubon my father moved to Audubon Park. I was a very small boy about far enough advanced in polite learning to know A from B. At that time Madam Audubon conducted a little school for her grandchildren, which was attended also by some of the neighbors' children, of whom I was one. It was my first attendance at a school.

Except for two houses with the plots of land about them, the whole tract of Minnie's Land, or Audubon Park, then belonged to Madam Audubon. Victor, the eldest son, was bedridden as the result of an accident, and John Woodhouse, a man of great energy,



MRS. LUCY BAKEWELL AUDUBON

managed the property and looked after the sale of the books. The family had abundant land, which was more or less encumbered and quite unsalable, but its resources in money were small and uncertain. I have a vivid memory of an occasion when my father took me with him when he went to see Madam Audubon to conclude the purchase of a piece of land, and of the great relief, satisfaction, and even gratitude, that she expressed to him for his willingness to make the purchase. The scene touched me, even though for years afterward I did not understand its meaning.

John W. Audubon was quite without business training, but he worked hard and faithfully to relieve the family embarrassment. He built several houses in Audubon Park, which were sold or rented, and in a field east of what is now Broadway, built a large frame house which for some years was occupied as a tenement by workmen in the nearby sugar refinery. All these things brought in some money, but there was always a heavy burden of debt.

Madam Audubon was a most kindly, gentle, benignant woman. She was loved and admired by everyone and—by most people—I think a little feared, for she had the repose and dignity of a great lady, and was not given to jokes or laughter. With the children she unbent far more than with older people, and they loved her dearly, and took their small troubles to her with the utmost confidence. Yet the children too stood a little in awe of her, and in her presence were never mischievous or playful at inopportune times. Her grandchildren, of course, called her Grandma, and she became Grandma to many other little ones of different blood.

She lived with her son Victor and the school was carried on in her bedroom, the southeast corner of the second floor of that house. In the schoolroom she was tireless, passing from one child to another, seeing that each was properly at work, helping, explaining, encouraging. During the hours of school each child received a personal supervision that was practically continuous.

She was tall, slender, erect, always clad in black, and always wore her white cap. I never saw her without her spectacles.

The Audubon Park of that day was quite different from what it became later. Except for the land about the Audubon houses, near the river, and that immediately about two houses higher up on the hill, it was a tangle of underbrush and saplings, above

which rose many forest trees, some of them of great size. Much of the land between the present 155th and 157th Streets was overgrown with thick-standing young hemlocks, and no grass grew on the shaded ground. North of 157th Street were the "near woods," so-called, through which ran a brook, and this tract remained wild and unimproved until the year 1870, when it was added to Audubon Park. To the north of 158th Street was a larger piece of woodland. Great white pines stood about the Audubon houses, and on one of them grew a vine of fox grapes, some of which the children always managed to get, after the first hard frost of autumn.

At a little distance from the houses the Hudson River Railroad ran across a wide cove, on an embankment, and the tide from the river rose and fell in the ponds lying between this causeway and the old river bank. In these ponds the boys fished for killies and eels, and in summer went crabbing. In winter the quiet water froze and we had good skating. The ponds were long ago filled up and even their memory has passed away.

The interior of the Audubon House was attractive—an old-fashioned country house, more or less worn and shabby from the tramping and play of a multitude of children. In the hall were antlers of elk and deer, which supported guns, shot pouches, powder flasks, and belts. Pictures that now are famous hung on the walls. In the dining-room facing the entrance from the hall, was the portrait of the naturalist and his dog, painted by John Woodhouse Audubon. The painting of pheasants started by a dog—now in the American Museum—was in the parlor south of the hall, and the picture of the eagle and the lamb upstairs in Madam Audubon's bedroom. Everywhere were vivid reminders of the former owner of the land.

To the north of the Victor Audubon and east of the John Audubon house, on a hillock, was the wooden building with a cellar known as "the cave," where some of the old copper plates were stored for a time. This building was always locked, and the boys seldom had an opportunity to look into it, except when John Audubon opened it and they were permitted to follow him in. John Harden, the man who boxed these plates, died last summer in his eighty-ninth year, on the very borders of Audubon Park, where he had lived for sixty-seven years.

Grandma Audubon gave me my first conscious lesson about birds. I cannot remember a time when the common names of the more familiar species were not known to me, though I presume the list was not a long one. It included, however, the passenger pigeon, which was seen in the dogwood trees each autumn, and the white-headed eagle, which in winter was extremely abundant on the floating ice of the river and sometimes brought its captive fish to the trees in the park, there to eat them or as often to quarrel about them with its fellows, and sometimes to drop the prey.

One of my early recollections is of being called from the breakfast table one morning to look at a large flock of Passenger Pigeons that was feeding in a dogwood tree twenty-five or thirty feet from the house. There were so many of the birds that all could not alight in it, and many kept fluttering about while others fed on the ground, eating the berries knocked off by those above.

Thirty years ago an account was printed in 'The Auk' by Mr. Geo. N. Lawrence of birds at Manhattanville before 1850. Audubon Park was only a mile above Manhattanville, and fifteen or twenty years later than the time written of by Mr. Lawrence, conditions there had not changed. The region was still untouched country. The City of New York had not begun its northward march. On Sixth Avenue the pavements stopped at 23rd Street, and on Broadway the dirt road began at 36th Street.

It was Grandma Audubon who, when I was a little fellow, identified for me a bird that I had never seen before. One morning in late winter, or early spring, on my way to school I had almost reached the Victor Audubon house, when I saw a dozen or twenty small greenish birds feeding on the grass under a pine tree. I approached them slowly, trying to see what they were; and they did not fly, even when I was within a few feet of them. I did not know them, and they were so tame that I resolved to try to catch one. The crabnet used in summer always hung in the area under the Victor Audubon piazza, and backing away from the birds I ran there, secured the net, and returned. It was not difficult for a cautious lad to get near enough to the little birds to pass the net over one, and when I had caught it I rushed into the house and up to Grandma's room, and showed her my prize. She told me that the bird was a Red Crossbill—a young

one—pointed out the peculiarities of the bill, told me something about the bird's life, and later showed me a picture of it. Then after a little talk she and I went downstairs and out of doors, found the birds still feeding there, and set the captive free.

Two or three years later Mr. John Audubon performed a like service for a small companion and me. Neither of the two boys was as yet permitted to carry a gun. But, like some other boys, they managed now and then to get hold of guns, borrowed or stolen, and to go shooting. In the large piece of woods north of 158th Street we saw a flock of birds fly up into a tulip tree, and recognized them as 'pigeons,' but small ones. It happened to be my turn to use the gun, and after appropriate care in stalking I killed one of the flock. As we had supposed, it was a 'pigeon,' unlike those we knew, yet one whose picture we had seen. We found the plate of the bird—a Ground Dove—and to make sure we were right, took the bird to Mr. John Audubon who was mending fence at the corner of 158th Street and Riker's 12th Avenue, and asked him what it was. He looked at it with interest, and told us that it was a Ground Dove, adding that there were many of them further south, but that he had never seen one here before. This may have been in the autumn of 1860 or 1861—not in 1862 as I have said earlier.

After a year or two of attendance at Madam Audubon's school I was sent to a boys' school. For years, however, I took lessons in music and French from a granddaughter of Madam Audubon, daughter of John Woodhouse and granddaughter of Rev. John Bachman, and was always in close association with the family.

A favorite playground of the boys of Audubon Park was the loft of John Woodhouse's barn, where, piled up against the walls, were rows of wooden boxes full of bird skins, collected by the naturalist and his sons. We had been told not to meddle with these, and usually obeyed the injunction, knowing that if we did any harm, this playground would be closed to us. Here in the barn, too, were piles of the old red muslin bound 'Ornithological Biography.' One of these sets was given my father perhaps sixty years ago, but unfortunately the old red covers have been torn off and something more modern substituted for them.

One day in winter a great pine tree in front of the Victor Audubon house was cut down and while splitting it into lengths for



JOHN WOODHOUSE AUDUBON

